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ABSTRACT

The Department of Human Communication at James Madison University initiated a program of assessment for majors in September 1990. A committee decided to focus in the first year on the cognitive core of information which students hopefully would have mastered, and, with faculty input, established a 30-item list of objectives for graduates of the program. An "in-house" test was created to evaluate the extent to which majors had achieved mastery of these departmental objectives. Additionally, an alumni survey was carried out to learn about graduates' satisfaction with their education and their perceptions of its usefulness, with resulting information proving useful on several levels. Finally, three experts in communication pedagogy reviewed and evaluated the department's objectives and methodology, making helpful suggestions. Future plans are being formed, and the experience of the first year indicates that first year efforts will be imperfect but will, at least, provide a base from which to expand and improve each year. (SR)

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PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION AND ENHANCE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT:

THE FIRST YEAR OF ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION MAJORS AT JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

1991 SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION CONVENTION
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THE FIRST YEAR OF ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION MAJORS AT JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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James Madison University is a public comprehensive state institution located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The university has roughly 11,000 students and 650 faculty. The Department of Human Communication, located in the College of Fine Arts and Communication, has 300 majors and 13 full-time faculty. Human Communication majors take a minimum of 33 hours of coursework in the department consisting of 15 hours of core courses, 12 hours of concentration requirements, and 6 hours of elective courses. Students may choose to concentrate in one of four areas: Dispute Resolution, Interpersonal Communication, Public Relations or Organizational Communication.

In response to State and University mandates, the Department of Human Communication initiated a program of assessment for our majors in September 1990. An assessment coordinator was named to chair a committee consisting of senior members of the faculty. The committee decided that in the first year we would focus primarily on the cognitive core of information which we hoped that

our students, regardless of their area of concentration, would have mastered. In order to accomplish this, all of the department's faculty were asked to provide to the committee with a list of objectives which they felt were appropriate for graduates of our program. A complete list of submissions was compiled and shared with all faculty. Faculty members were then asked to examine the complete list and to provide the committee with suggestions regarding additions, deletions, or items which should be rewritten. The assessment coordinator compiled this information, shared it with the committee, and after several meetings the objectives for graduates of our program were established as follows:

STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

RECOGNIZE GOALS WHICH ARE ACHIEVABLE THROUGH COMMUNICATION

ANALYZE AUDIENCES AND ADAPT MESSAGES SO THAT THEY ARE APPROPRIATE TO PARTICULAR AUDIENCES

IDENTIFY REASONS WHY WELL INTENTIONED PEOPLE OFTEN MISUNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER

DESCRIBE A MODEL OF COMMUNICATION INCLUDING REFERENCES TO SENDER, RECEIVER, MESSAGE, CHANNEL, FEEDBACK AND NOISE

IDENTIFY DIFFERENT WAYS TO ORGANIZE A MESSAGE

UTILIZE ACCEPTED STANDARDS TO EVALUATE COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

IDENTIFY STEPS TO FOLLOW IN ORDER TO PREPARE AND PRESENT A MESSAGE

RECOGNIZE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

IDENTIFY WAYS TO USE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION TO DETERMINE THE AFFECTIVE STATES OF OTHERS

IDENTIFY REASONS WHY MESSAGES RECEIVED DIFFER FROM MESSAGES SENT

RECOGNIZE WAYS IN WHICH SOURCE CREDIBILITY AFFECTS A COMMUNICATOR'S PERSUASIVENESS

IDENTIFY EFFECTIVE LISTENING BEHAVIORS

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE WAYS TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR A CLAIM

IDENTIFY WAYS IN WHICH ORAL COMMUNICATION DIFFERS FROM WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

RECOGNIZE THAT FEEDBACK IS INHERENT IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

RECOGNIZE THAT NOISE IS ALWAYS PRESENT IN COMMUNICATION

RECOGNIZE THAT PEOPLE ARE SUBJECT TO BE INFLUENCED IN ACCORD WITH THEIR NEEDS, DESIRES, ATTITUDES, VALUES AND GOALS

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN OPINION AND FACT

RECOGNIZE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF COMMUNICATORS

DESCRIBE, ANALYZE, INTERPRET AND EVALUATE COMMUNICATION

RECOGNIZE TERMS, AXIOMS AND MAJOR THEORIES RELEVANT TO THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION

RECOGNIZE WAYS TO PRESENT CLEAR AND COHERENT MESSAGES

IDENTIFY WAYS TO MAKE USE OF FEEDBACK RECEIVED IN RESPONSE TO THEIR MESSAGES

RECOGNIZE CRITERIA APPROPRIATE TO THE SOLUTION OF A PROBLEM WHEN WORKING IN SMALL GROUPS

IDENTIFY SIGNIFICANT DISTRACTING BEHAVIORS WHICH IMPACT UPON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC SPEAKERS

IDENTIFY QUESTIONS WHICH CAN BE ANSWERED BY RESEARCH

IDENTIFY TOOLS WHICH CAN BE USED TO ANSWER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

IDENTIFY WAYS IN WHICH COMMUNICATION DIFFERS FROM CONTEXT TO CONTEXT

DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS CONFIDENT IN A VARIETY OF COMMUNICATION SITUATIONS INCLUDING: MEETING PEOPLE, SERVING AS INTERVIEWER, SERVING AS INTERVIEWEE, WORKING IN SMALL GROUPS, PRESENTING PUBLIC MESSAGES, AND HELPING OTHERS IMPROVE THEIR COMMUNICATION

In order to be sure that all of the stated cognitive objectives had been addressed in our courses, all of the department's faculty were asked to review the

list and to indicate which objectives were covered in courses which they teach.

ASSESSMENT METHODS

Exam for graduating seniors

In order to evaluate the extent to which our majors had achieved mastery of the department's objectives, the committee decided to create an "in-house" test. There were several reasons for this decision: (1) there is no recognized standard test to measure the knowledge acquired by graduates in the field of human communication, (2) it was felt that the creation of our own test would result in the highest possible level of faculty commitment to the assessment process, and (3) faculty desired to maintain control of the department's curriculum and it was felt that those who create the test control the curriculum. Eventually, a review of our methods by several of the country's foremost experts demonstrated that our objectives and measuring instruments were as good as anything they had seen.

In order to create the department's test, all faculty members were asked to submit questions pertaining to each objective which they believed would test student's mastery of the material. This resulted in a pool of hundreds of questions from which the final items were selected. Over a series of meetings, the committee sought to eliminate duplication and insure that all items related to the department's stated objectives. Suggested questions were eliminated if they were

unclear or too specific to a particular course which some students might not have taken. The committee also eliminated items if members could not agree on the one best answer. Next, the committee made sure that the test provided several items relating to each of the department's objectives. Finally, the committee considered the achievement score at which students would have demonstrated competence and the cut-off point was set at 70%.

Alumni survey

An alumni questionnaire was designed in order to learn more about our graduates, their level of satisfaction with the education they received while studying with us, and their perception of the extent to which each of our courses was beneficial to them. In addition, the survey form included several open-ended questions regarding what they perceived to be the strongest areas of the department, the weakest areas of the department, and what they believed should be added to the curriculum. The questionnaire was sent to each of our graduates from the last five years.

Peer review

Three experts in the field of communication pedagogy were selected to review and evaluate the department's objectives and assessment methodology.

They were asked to consider clarity and precision, scope, relevance; comprehensiveness, and appropriateness.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

We are currently at the end of our first year's assessment activities and are in the process of evaluating results and their implications. It seems as though the exam for graduating seniors will demonstrate that our students have, by and large, mastered the cognitive objectives which were established. Our methodology, however, may not have allowed us to sensibly evaluate their mastery of each goal. Typically we used four or five multiple choice questions for each of the objectives but we are not entirely comfortable making judgments regarding mastery of objectives based on how well students performed on a small number of questions. Due to concerns about students' attention span we had limited the test to one hundred items but we may double that in future versions of the test.

Results from the alumni survey proved to be quite useful on several levels. We have learned much more about why students have chosen our department for their major and this information will help us emphasize our strengths as we seek to recruit new majors. Alumni also mentioned a variety of shortcomings of our program- facilities, equipment, class size and difficulty of getting desired courses. We intend to use these comments to bolster our arguments for the acquisition of additional resources from the university. Many alumni also told us

that they wish we had provided a wider variety of internship experiences. We plan to do this and believe that it will help to strengthen our program. Our alumni survey also revealed to us that many more of our students than we realized pursue graduate education several years after graduation. This, too, will impact our instruction and planning.

The peer review portion of our first year assessment activity consisted of asking some of our colleagues from other institutions to look over our objectives and measuring instruments and to provide evaluative comments. Their suggestions were helpful and their praise was also useful in supporting the legitimacy of our assessment methodology to various officials outside of the department.

FUTURE PLANS

Next year we plan to revise and improve the our measuring instruments, we will begin to focus on communication skills and work toward the establishment of a "communication laboratory" where students will receive evaluations of their performance in various contexts (presenting speeches, working in small groups, listening, conducting interviews). Next year we will also create additional tests to measure students' abilities relative to their chosen concentrations within the department (Dispute Resolution, Interpersonal Communication, Public Relations or Organizational Communication). We also plan to do more relative to involving students in the goal setting process- we'd like to find out more concerning what

goals they believe we should include.

Based on our experiences to date we would encourage departments contemplating commencement of an outcomes assessment program to view the enterprise as an opportunity rather than as a threat and to involve all faculty and students as fully as possible in goal setting. Finally, we would encourage others to simply get started in some fashion. It seems unwise to postpone assessment until it is felt that you have a nearly perfect list of goals and ways to measure their accomplishment. First year efforts will be imperfect but will, at least, provide a base from which to expand and improve each year.